

Improving communications

ANGELA BRANDT - Independent Record - 08/22/09 | Posted: Saturday, August 22, 2009 12:00 am
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Angela Brandt Independent Record - A member of the Montana National Guard sits on the ramp of a CH-47 Chinook helicopter while en route to a new communications suite, which is under construction northeast of Great Falls.

A new antenna and radio site being constructed northeast of Great Falls will benefit not only Malmstrom Air Force Base, which is funding the project, but also many other local, state and federal agencies.

The communication suite, which is currently in the works atop Highwood Baldy, will allow agencies to communicate with one another in a time of crisis, such as a wildfire, in addition to beefing up the capability of Malmstrom's missile command.

Lt. Mauri Slater said the project comes with a price tag of \$1.9 million.

"We need this as part of our coverage project but Montana also needs this for the interoperability project," Slater said while onsite by the communication suite Friday.

The new suite will provide advanced digital, secure voice and data communications for Malmstrom, and also public safety agencies.

Those benefiting from the new communication suite are Chouteau, Cascade and Judith Basin counties, Montana Highway Patrol, U.S. Forest Service and the Montana Department of Transportation, as well as other local law enforcement and first-responder agencies.

Down the road, the communication suite will help link agencies as part of the Interoperability Montana project, which will offer law enforcement and other agencies responding in emergencies to securely communicate seamlessly, meaning the radios will be automatically switch to the closest repeater without interruption.

Lewis and Clark County was the first in the state to embark on the state-of-the-art emergency radio communication network in 2005. The network is expected to be running state-wide by 2013.

The Montana National Guard was called in to assist with helicopters to transport building material and equipment to the site, which is in rough terrain. Slater said while there is a road to the suite, it cannot accommodate the size and weight of the equipment.

On Thursday, the Montana National Guard lifted a building, weighing about 20,000 pounds, to the mountain-top site.

The work continued Friday, when a CH-47 Chinook helicopter was used to move equipment, including three radio microwave dishes.

Dave Cunningham, public information officer for the Lewis and Clark National Forest, said the new suite will benefit public safety in the event of a natural disaster.

"Communications is imperative to that. This ability will put another tool in our tool box," he said while watching the helicopter transport supplies.

Charity Watt Levis, public information officer for the Montana Department of Transportation, said the department doesn't currently have a statewide communication system and this suite will help with that.

"The ability to have centralized communication is huge for this state," she said.

"One of the great things about this is that everyone is working together," Watt Levis added.

Construction of the new suite is expected to be completed by the first week of September.